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Subject vs object

Francesca Lalanne Jeune

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School of Art
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**SUBJECT VS OBJECT
By
Francesca Lalanne Jeune
October 30, 2012**

Thesis Title: SUBJECT VS OBJECT

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the concepts that inform my thesis work for the Master of Fine Arts in Fine Arts Studio from Rochester Institute of Technology.

I have always been intrigued by circumstances such as war and oppression. I have also wondered about the opposite, moments of peace and serenity. Inevitably, I have allowed these dualistic thoughts to govern my artwork, abstractly through form and underlying narratives.

In my thesis, I investigate concepts such as identity, history, memory, and how they play a role in my artwork. I see history as a tool for examining identity, while memory serves as a more concrete channel for verifying truth.

Throughout my research, I have discovered truths as well as conflicts. I have also reached a level of synthesis that fluctuates between the work as an object and myself as the subject.

INTRODUCTION

Thesis Statement

I am interested in the dualistic relationships between things and have tried to express this concern both visually and conceptually. For me, dualism can be a visual play between solid and hollow, light and dark, spaces and planes, textures that hide and reveal, or forms that reflect small and large entities. This is why the line plays such an important role in my work; it connects and divides these forms. Yet, space is also important. It helps in expressing microscopic views, vastness, or various proportions that often indicate *under* or *overwhelming* positions.

What I consider to be overwhelming is the dialectical nature of art. Art has a tendency to be redefined and there seems to always be a pressure for it to be avant-garde. Similarly, I find the subject of human identity overwhelming and pertinent. The pressure there lies in self-definition, presence, and acceptance. In my work, the play on identity reflects the *to and fro*, *then and now* of the *self* and *other*. It is about the fluctuation between opposing ideas, yet also about the presence and absence of the boundaries therein. I try to display these concepts through contrasting forms and shapes. My hope is that these polarities stand as a visual metaphor for the way we as humans differentiate between ourselves, and sometimes between what we think of as objects and ourselves.

I am fascinated by history (the *then*) and how we seem to seek its texture through the objects we preserve today (the *now*) such as texts, images, and reliquaries. Most importantly, I find interest in how something so intangible as the past constructs who we are today. Thus for me the narrative is powerful, memory is essential, while identity remains indefinite. If we alter historical narratives, we alter present conditions. Fortunately, the mere definition of postmodernism has allowed me to celebrate history and the concept of illustrating the old with the new (or vice versa). I recognize the “new”, technology, as a concept and as man-made objects. I see it as a ruling force that is penetrating the contemporary world but I am almost certain our essence has not changed through time.

SECTION I: INSPIRATIONS



Francesca Lalanne Jeune, *The Dialectic*, 2012.
Acrylic, stain, goldleaf, aluminum on wood. 72 x 48 in.

History

History has always been intriguing to me because it is open to the imagination. Archeology and object preservation gives us tangible clues into history, however the historical narrative itself is always manmade, it is always imaginative. Therefore, I see historical truth as something fragile and debatable. This idea has opened up my mind to the infinite possibilities of contemporary art and the narrative. My aim is for my work to be historically reflective but momentarily relevant. I believe the narrative is a great instrument for supporting both ends.

A New Universal History

My affirmation is that post-modernity is long gone and we are now in a time of eclecticism and hybridity. Multiculturalism should no longer be the amalgamation of cultural or ethnic groups, but it ought to now be recognized as a synthesis between humans and objects. I find Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) a great literary example of the complexities of such a concept. What Haraway proposes in her argument is the rejection of tradition. She suggests an "apostasy" of a history of patriarchal dominance and a realization of equality. She proclaims the need for equality between humans and machines, women and men, and most certainly between races. Her approach is the recognition of historical, psycho-political strategies (ie: militarism), our current psycho-social condition, (cyborg culture) and a future of integrated circuits.¹ My view is that "hybridity" should not only be a case for objectivity or the scientific mixture of species, but it should also be an approach to ideas and subjects. This is so that it opens up the mind to hybrid, alternative, supplementary truths and stories. Susan Buck-Morss' *Haiti, Hegel, and Universal History* (2009) is the perfect example of what I mean by eclecticism and hybrid stories. She introduces possible truths about Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic that reveal a relationship between the Dialectic and the Haitian Revolution. This new mixture of ideas is considered avant-guard because it is not popular amongst historical texts. It is considered hybrid because it creates a new image of history, concomitantly a new image of present identities.



Photo by Vitolio Jeune

Memory

I was three months away from being born in the Bahamas. My mother, while pregnant with me, decided to leave Port-Au-Prince, pass through the Bahamas and migrate to Miami. The story goes that Haiti was not yet in major turmoil; however, America was the land of better opportunity. When I turned two years old, my mother sent me back to Haiti to live with her sister-in-law. She retained the idea that the school system there was better and more disciplined. As far as I can remember, life was blissful. We lived in the city, had maids, spent weekends in the provinces, and traveled often. All of this came to an end in 1987 when I was sent back to Miami. Haiti was going through a major *coup d'état*. I can clearly remember the sudden roadblocks, anonymous shootings, and the curfews. Soon after my departure, our Port-au-Prince home was looted.

I recall this story because this line of events abruptly brought me [back] to the United States. I had to suddenly assimilate a culture that symbolized independence and freedom. I attended coeducational public schools and no longer had to wear uniforms. I was overwhelmed, fascinated, and immersed in a new (first world) system of mass media, labor, production and consumption. This is not to say that there is something

wrong with the system (as they exist everywhere), it is to acknowledge the existence of a system and its power. It is to also recognize my connection with two cultures.

Psychological Revolution

As I grew older I also thought about what caused my mother to migrate, what brought me here, and ultimately what caused the coup d'état? It is understood that the 1986 and 1988 revolts in Haiti were partly the uprising of the poorer class. However, in my attempt to understand Haiti's current condition, I also had to go back to its 1804 revolt and question its significance. By numerous accounts, it seemed as though the Haitian Revolution (immediately succeeding the French Revolution) was a racial issue (blacks rebelling against their white masters and so forth). Yet, in *Haiti, Hegel and Universal History*, Susan Buck-Morss compels me to consider a psychological revolution.

Buck-Morss uses Hegel's master-slave dialectic as an example of a philosophical achievement that has been recognized by scholars. However, it has been acknowledged without any elaboration on the global events that took place concurrently. How can the theory of master-slave relations come to fruition without the influence of an actual master-slave event? Her claim is that the Haitian Revolution inspired Hegel's Dialectic and that both ends should be acknowledged. Buck-Morss persuades us not to look at philosophical achievements as completely abstract and intellectual discourses, but to also look at them as human inspired poetry.

Yet, there is a twist to Buck-Morss' analysis. She concludes with a list of questions that ask us to, at least, wonder about this "Gordian Knot", as she calls it (the dialectic). She quotes:

Where in this discourse is the critical intellectual to find a foothold?" Is it enough to have rescued the Haitian story from absorption into Eurocentricity? Can we rest satisfied with the call for acknowledging "multiple modernities," with a politics of "diversality" or "multiversality," when in fact the inhumanities of these multiplicities are often strikingly the same?"ⁱⁱ

This "common inhumanity" is what leads to the condition of Haiti today. Once the slaves were emancipated in 1804, they remodeled the new Republic after their French imperial oppressors. They began to oppress each other through a class (instead of race) system.

By this example, I see the dilemma with the Hegel's Dialectic (1807). It proves that the ego continually recognizes the *other* and never the singular. Buck-Morss does

not answer her questions. However, my understanding is that she wants us to blur the lines of identity. She wants us to look at history through a universal lens and the possibility of “co-significance” and coexistence. This in effect will have us respect each other today with less superior minds. “By assembling material related to Hegel and Haiti that changes what we think we know about the past, it changes how we think in the present” she quotes.ⁱⁱⁱ The most compelling aspect of Buck-Morss’ discourse is “emancipation from mental slavery”. It calls for us to be unique individuals and make choices through awareness rather than being coerced by unexamined influences. It is an idea that can be applied to any human being.

The problem with Haiti today is not simply the result of an insufficient revolution. Buck-Morss puts it well when she states that the political will of the Haitian people continue to be hamstrung by the intervention of foreign powers^{iv}. I believe in order for people to unshackle themselves, they must recognize the covert string of bondage. At times, this cord is hardly visible while it is continually charged with power.

SECTION II: EVOLUTION



Top: Francesca Lalanne Jeune. *Exodus of Egos*, 2010. Stain on Aluminum
Bottom: Francesca Lalanne Jeune, *Rebel Raft*, 2012. Cast iron, wood

From Intangible to Tangible Concepts

These claims of strings of bondage, power, and revolution are the fuel to my artwork and imagination. They can be seen literally or conceptually. These ideas are interwoven throughout my work, however can be presented individually. My objective is not to be bound by them but to push them to new and various forms of presentation (besides strictly painting and sculpture). To implement this goal, I wanted to display an equal balance of different mediums in my thesis presentation.

Although my work is primarily influenced by the narrative and philosophy, I do believe they can be visual. I believe the visual is necessary to convey these ideas for human perception. By that I mean ideas can be read, stories can be told, but they cannot be fully experienced without imagination, even if this imagination belongs to the viewer. What my visual work symbolizes is my imagination. It is the same as a film director basing his/her oeuvre on a novel. I would like to base my work on stories that I believe invoke awareness of social, political, and certain human conditions. Further, I hope they invoke humility.

The Narrative, A Synopsis

Ego must step outside of the frame so that Ego can see himself in the frame. The frame is a vicious system. If there is a message, it is to not get so caught that Ego cannot see himself being caught. The system has two parts; good controllers and bad controllers. The bad one is the one that blinds Ego from truths. It shows a hierarchy of differences, which causes Ego to hate and create war. The good one is the one that allows Ego to see himself equal to others and realize that they are all on the same ship.

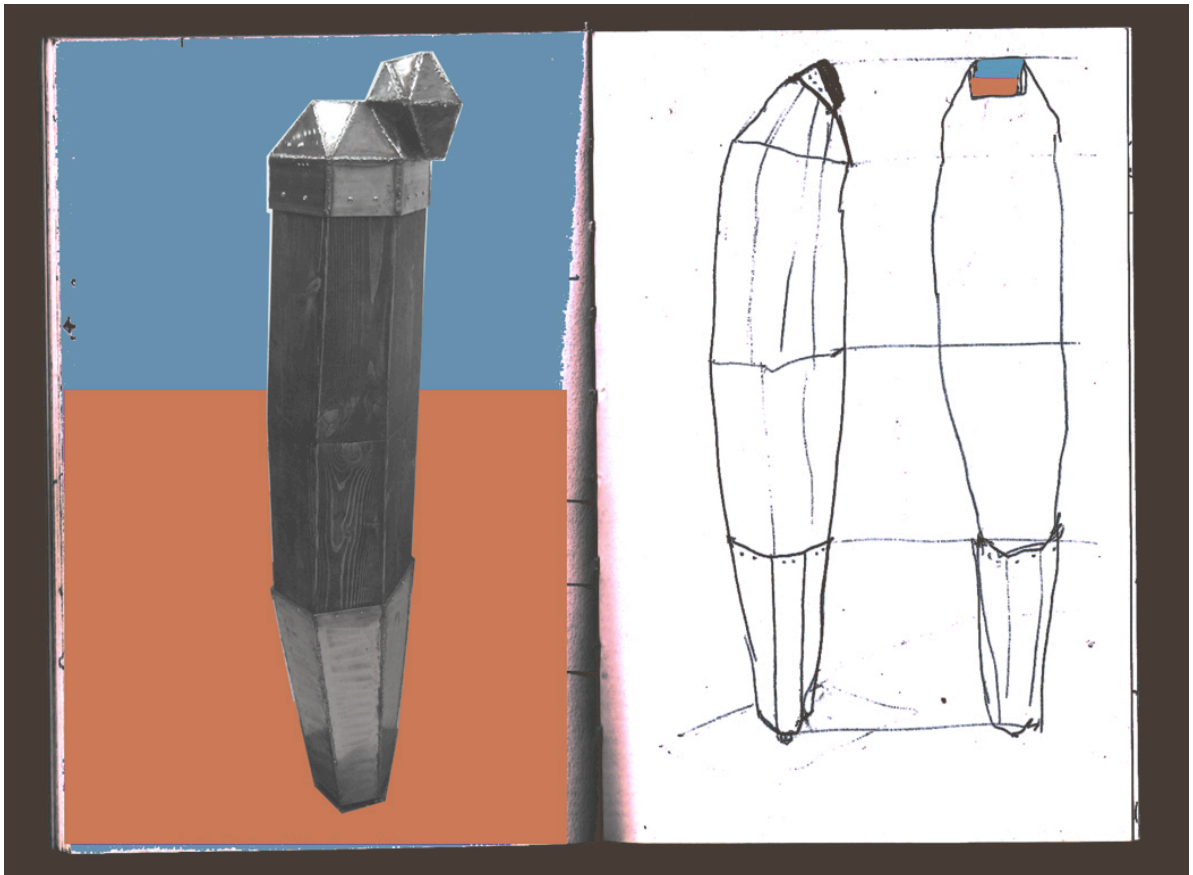


Francesca Lalanne Jeune, *Untitled*, Ink sketch, 2012

The Medium

Recently, I have been focusing more on art, the language, as opposed to a particular medium or craft. Understanding art as primarily a language has allowed me to expand my interest in eclecticism rather than focusing on one medium. My focus has been more towards communicating an idea through various forms rather than struggling with one particular medium. I realize this expansion has led contemporary art to the most unfathomable conceptual art forms. However, for me, I cannot make such a quick jump. It is a slow contemplative process. I would not like to see myself trapped in one medium, but it is hard to stay away from the traditional sketch; the painting. I still value painting, as a primary visual definition of art. Whether abstract or figurative, it still holds the power to tell stories.

SECTION III: PROCESS



Francesca Lalanne Jeune, Digital sketch, 2011

Painting as object

In my paintings, I am combining both abstract and the figurative to represent memory, dreams, and present conditions. In my approach, I tend to fluctuate between the painting as an object being defined by its material and the subject it creates as a two dimensional image. My aim is not to create ambiguity between painting and sculpture. Rather, it is to simply let the characteristic of the material play a role in enhancing the subject of the painting. I start by acknowledging the given material, and, because of its texture and abstract patterns, I typically work with wood. I then use a different material such as metal in order to create a definitive break between planes and spaces in my composition.

The second process is the layering of colors. This act symbolizes manipulation of the given and the need to imagine and create. Manipulation is a concept that I am slowly coming to terms with as I am realizing it as a human tendency. In other words, I find a parallel in artists manipulating objects and leaders ruling nations. Thus I always make an attempt to leave or reveal a part of the original surface as a form of “tabula rasa”, the untainted state. This untainted state represents an original truth, before the influence of manmade narratives, analogously, the artist’s mark. This, for example, can be seen in the surface of the lower half of the figure in *Buoyancy* [Fig.1].



Figure 1. Francesca Lalanne Jeune, *Buoyancy*, 2012.
Acrylic, stain, aluminum on wood. 72 x 48 in.



Figure 2. Mark Rothko, American, 1903-1970, *Untitled*, 1969
Repository : Kate Rothko Prizel, ARTstor : AROTHKO_10313269641

I have always been influenced by Mark Rothko's large-scale color field paintings [Fig.2]. They are large enough to play an architectural role and allow the viewer to become part

of the painting. Yet, what I enjoy the most is that these “color fields” can be seen as fields, boxes, planes, scapes, or terrains. In *Buoyancy* [Fig.1], I have placed the figure in two color planes in order to signify submergence and vastness. The notion of vastness is reflective of my condition as an artist. It represents my being overwhelmed with the identity of being an artist while finding in it something sublime. Therefore, I am also working with the idea of a being caught in a sublime space and experience, and being a sleeper (in the naïve sense) and a dreamer (in an optimistic sense).

The third condition is the surface treatment. In some areas of the painting I will repeat the process of sanding and layering several times until I am satisfied with its impression. In my work, I do not believe in pristine textures. Instead, I favor a rustic aesthetic that represents a turbulent journey [Fig.3].



Figure 3. Francesca Lalanne Jeune. *Collapsus* (detail), 2011.
Stain on aluminum, wood. 72 x 48 in.

Viewer as the Subject



Figure 4. Francesca Lalanne Jeune. *Reliquary for Thought*, 2012. Sculpture Installation

The state of being pushed and pulled between ideas is a concept I hope manifests itself in my paintings as well as in my three dimensional work. Whether the subjects are the figures in the paintings or the viewer in the space, my aim is to investigate dualism and polarity between various entities.

In *Reliquary for Thought* (2012)[Fig.4], my aim was to express the relationship between a familiar object [in history] and its transformation [in the present tense]. The inspiration for the form of this piece came from the initial thought of having a cube-like mass suspended over a figure. I wanted something intriguing with an intimidating size. The thought of a guillotine made sense to me in relation to its historical context. However, I did not want to be literal in terms of function or by adding anything like a guillotine's blade. I wanted the viewers to use their imagination while questioning; what is it about, this box that could be as sharp as a blade? As I experienced the work myself and observed it from a distance, the proverb "curiosity killed the cat" came to mind. The work began to have a double meaning. I wondered if "it kills to be curious" or "curiosity leads to death". My hope was that the 10 by 5 inch "peep hole" at the bottom of the box would create either form of inquisitiveness. Conceptually, I wanted this curiosity to lead to the death of consciousness. I wanted for the viewer to walk underneath the box and, for a brief moment, forget that it was a "guillotine" and be engaged in a new form of aesthetics. The polarity in this piece is intended to be between the viewer and his/herself, where dualism manifests itself the most, in decision making.

The projecting animation [Fig.5, 6] that loops inside the box is a mnemonic skit that I hope reminds the viewer of their vulnerability to the spectacle. I use the term spectacle here because, as a whole, the piece is also related to the history of executions and them being public exhibitions. Even today, the execution of someone by an electric chair or lethal injection is made into a performance. While stating this, I cannot help but recall the "death" of Sadaam Hussein being paraded on every network made available to the public. It was like a placebo effect on Americans, we were relieved of his existence. It also said two things; that violence is entertainment and that the executioner's platform is no longer made of wooden planks but of camera lenses. This has made me take notice of the power of technology and the spectacle. Guy Debord reminds us that the spectacle is almost inevitable. In his *Société du Spectacle* he writes;

The Spectacle cannot be abstractly contrasted to concrete social activity. Each side of such a duality is itself divided. The spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of that reality. Conversely, real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it. Objective reality is present on both sides.^v

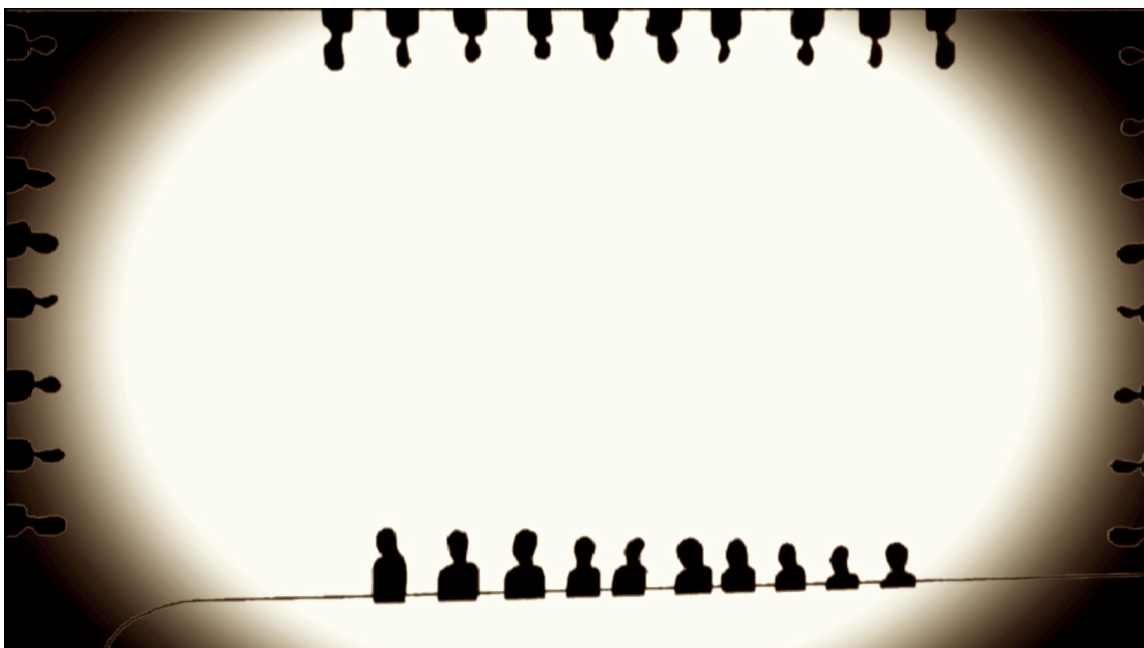


Figure 5. Francesca Lalanne Jeune. *Les Autocrates* (still), 2011. Video. Dur: 3 mins

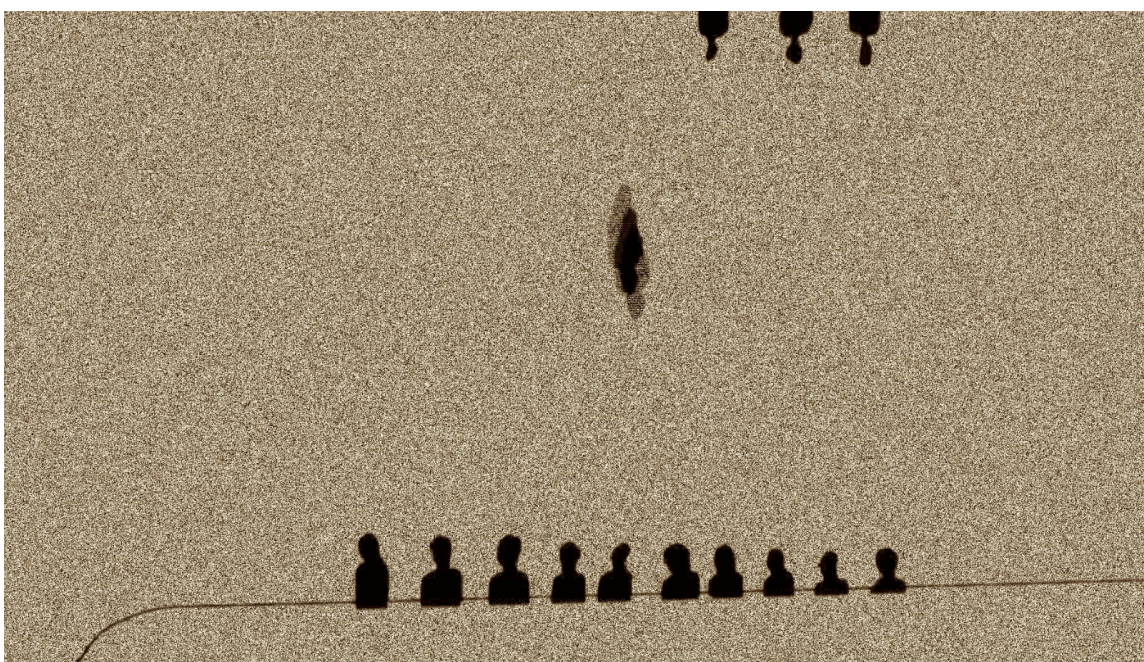


Figure 6. Francesca Lalanne Jeune. *Les Autocrates* (still), 2011. Video. Dur: 3 mins

Similarly, in *Reliquary for Thought*, the outsider at some point becomes the viewer. Whether they choose to stand under the box or not, they play the role of a second audience. I, during the opening reception of my thesis exhibition, felt like a third audience as I used my camera to document viewer reactions. There, my identity as an artist was challenged as I was also caught in my own spectacle.

Technology

Technology is a component in my thesis work that was initially an experiment with extending sculpture. Soon, it became visually and conceptually appropriate. I thought, if my work was to be about conflict, systems, unknown powers and manipulation, the *machine* had to play an important role. This technology is also meant to reflect our current time. An artist whose technology-based artwork inspires me is Nam June Paik. His main medium, the television box, is presented sometimes as a non-functioning object, a building block, or a broadcasting device [Fig.7]. They are "found technological objects".

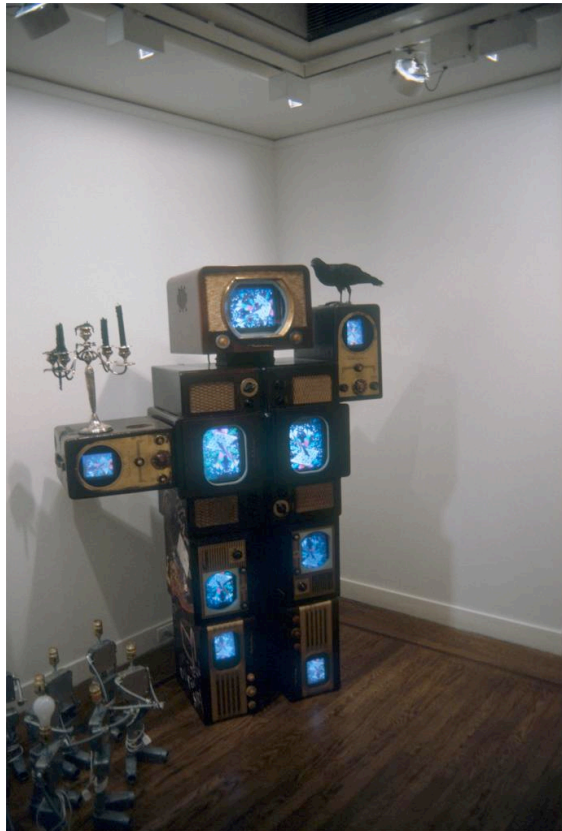


Figure 7. Nam June Paik. *Edgar Allen Poe*, 1990. ARTstor. LARRY_QUALLS_10311716801

What I aimed to do different was embed these screens into fabricated sculptural forms. Nonetheless, the window screen is the feature that appeals to me the most. It acts as the boundary and transitional point of reflection and interpretive engagement. This fascination came to me after reading Peter Weibel's *The World as Interface* (1996). His essay coincided with my perspective on humans being attracted by and blending with electronics. He tells us "with machine vision man has lost another anthropomorphic monopoly."^{vi} In *Captainertia* (2012) [Fig.8, 9], I wanted for the viewer to approach the piece as a form of self-reflection. I substituted the face of the "figure" with a digital picture frame that loops a noisy image of a figure within. I wanted the piece to have the characteristic of a container with a virtual inhabitant. My goal was to examine the relationship between internal and external bodies or identities. At the same time, I wanted it to have a dominating gaze towards the viewer. I thought, by mounting the piece slightly above ground, I could achieve that effect.



Figure 8. Francesca Lalanne Jeune, *Captainertia*, 2012, Wall installation



Figure 9. Francesca Lalanne Jeune, *Captainertia*, 2012, Wall installation (close up)

Peter Weibel compels us to look at our world with what he calls an "Endophysical" approach; a science that explores what a system looks like when the observer becomes part of this system. In reference to art he quotes;

Electronic art moves art from object-centered stage to a context- and observer-oriented one. In this way, it becomes a motor of change, from modernity to postmodernity, i.e., the transition from closed, decision-defined and complete systems to open, non-defined, and incomplete ones, from the world necessity to a world of observer-driven variables, from monoperspective to multiple perspective, from hegemony to pluralism, from text to context, from locality to non-locality, from totality to particularity, from objectivity to observer-relativity, from autonomy to co-variance, from the dictatorship of subjectivity to immanent world of machine.^{vii}

CONCLUSION



Francesca Lalanne Jeune. *Sleeper*, 2012.
Steel, wood, light bulb, mp3 player, speakers. (72 x 38 x 24 inches)

Conflicts

Being held captive has always been a concern for me. I realize that I am in bondage to art. Carl Jung puts it well when he says that art is an innate drive that seizes a human being and makes them its instrument.^{viii} However, the work that I have created during my thesis study is about the least visible of conflicts. It is about the struggle between my artwork and my identity. The matter is, "should the work be about me or about anything else?" In the beginning, I wanted the work to be about something universal, the human condition. I wanted to rid my oeuvre of anything personal and identity-based. My identity, to my dismay, is my condition and essentially will always be the source of my work. I am certainly a component of the universe; therefore, any factor of my identity is a universal factor.

Thus in the end I lost the conflict. I gave in to expressing neither bigger or lesser but parallel issues that are unsettling. As homage to Peter Weible's concept, I have called them the Endo and Exo states.

The Endo: I deem my work to be a manifestation for challenging a social norm. By this I mean it is not expected that a black woman of Haitian descent be an artist (that is not the norm). As a woman, she is not expected to be fabricating large-scale metal sculptures. Lastly, the subject of her work is not expected to be about anything but feminism, race, and identity. I say this because this is what I have observed in contemporary art culture.

The Exo: I deem my work to be a manifestation for consciousness. By this I mean the work is about the human condition. It is about war, politics, technology, captivity, and revolution. Moreover, It is about looking at, not just history, but contemporary culture through a universal lens.

The parallel is that with an open mind, history is challenged. Preconceived ideas are diminished and new truths are embraced; which brings me back to Susan Buck-Morss' Universal History. Her discourse opens up the mind to alternative possibilities, *petit recits*, the peculiar, and the unexpected. It allows us to believe that perhaps, a brilliant German thinker such as Hegel was inspired by the Haitian Revolution to write his notable Master-slave Dialectic. This dialectic, in return, inspires me to investigate my being and location in time and space. My race, gender, locale, faith, and bi-nationality are simply differences. Yet, they are the causes of conflicts. I am obliged to claim truth to stories that bring about a social awakening.



Francesca Lalanne Jeune. *U.S.S. Lazar*, 2012.
Acrylic, stain, on aluminum, wood. 72 x 48 in.

Boundless Fluidity

My thesis work is a lifetime pursuit and thus will never reach a point of completion. The world is in flux, and I, being a component, am as well. I have been compelled to further explore new forms and various mediums aside from painting. I do not think, however, I will ever catch up to the “contemporary” medium. Even my use of technological gadgets such as a projector is nearly outdated as we are now in an age of “wirelessness” and boundless fluidity. Art has become primarily about creating a genius experience and not simply visual aesthetics. Still, I believe in visual aesthetics. The painting is a simulacrum as much as the touch-screen. Thus for the sake of a culture that lives of immediacy and instant simulacrum, I will continue to use whatever mediums that fulfill these conditions.

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ⁱ Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," 149-181

ⁱⁱ Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, 139

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, ix
^{iv} Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, 137
^v Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, Thesis 8
^{vi} Weibel, "The World as Interface: Toward the Construction of Context-Controlled Event-Worlds," 340
^{vii} Weibel, "The World as Interface: Toward the Construction of Context-Controlled Event-Worlds," 343
^{viii} Jung, "Psychology and Literature," 208-223